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UWF OEDE awards grant to help Fort Walton Beach brewery expand

Pensacola, Fla. – Aug. 9, 2016 – The University of West Florida Office of Economic Development and Engagement has awarded a \$150,000 grant to Props Craft Brewery LLC allowing the craft brewery to expand into the mass manufacturing and distribution market by opening a new facility in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

The grant is part of the Industry Recruitment, Retention and Expansion Fund program, which was launched in 2011 as part of Florida's Oil Spill Recovery Act. The program, which has resulted in 9,000 new jobs in Northwest Florida, was established to assist communities in eight counties disproportionately affected by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The state contracted with OEDE to manage the program.

Props Craft Brewery was first established in 2011 as a small brewpub by two U.S. Air Force pilots and has grown into a successful distribution brewery in Fort Walton Beach. Props needed to expand to continue its momentum in the current craft beer market, and this expansion will allow the company to move into a regional production brewery and meet the demand for their handcrafted beer.

The grant will help the company establish a presence at 125 Lovejoy Road in a 9,445 square-foot building near the Fort Walton Beach Commerce and Technology Park. The new facility will house a commercial brewery and will attract industry specialists in brewing, cellaring, distribution and chemical engineering. All of Props' flagship products are produced with American agricultural products. The production facility will have a taproom where customers may come to view the operations of the brewery.

Company officials estimate the grant will lead to \$1.3 million in capital expenditures and allow Props Craft Brewery to create 10 new jobs. Officials expect the new positions to pay \$43,091 annually, excluding benefits. The grant program requires that Props Craft Brewery meet these targets to receive funding.

Props Craft Brewery officials considered other locations before ultimately deciding to establish their newest venture in Fort Walton Beach. The company received support from the City of

Fort Walton Beach and the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners through their respective Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemption programs.

“(Props Craft Brewery’s expansion) would not have been possible without the support of the leadership in the City of Fort Walton Beach and the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners,” said company co-founder and co-owner Nathan Vannatter.

“Props Brewery's \$1.3 million expansion will establish Okaloosa County's only local distribution brewery. The 30-barrel brewhouse will match the largest breweries from Jacksonville, Florida, to Louisiana. The craft beer revolution that is sweeping the nation now has a home right here in Okaloosa County,” said co-owner Brian O’Neill.

“We have been doing business in Okaloosa for five years, but the professionals at the Okaloosa Economic Development Council guided us through processes that we did not even know existed to assist our expansion. These processes netted us over \$200K in tax exemptions and grant dollars. I would encourage any business, no matter their experience, to consult the EDC,” said company co-founder and co-owner Michael Kee.

“The OEDE's support cemented our position to expand our distribution brewery in not only in the state of Florida, but within the city of Fort Walton Beach where Props Brewery was conceived,” said Travis Peterson, the company’s co-owner.

Keeping companies like Props Craft Brewery in Northwest Florida is vital to economic growth in the region, said Florida Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville.

“I’m particularly pleased that funds I appropriated will be used to help expand a veteran-owned business like Props Craft Brewery,” said Gaetz, who sponsored the Oil Spill Recovery Act in 2010. “Props is a contributor to the revitalization of downtown Fort Walton Beach and solid proof that Northwest Florida is the best place for veterans with good business plans to succeed and create jobs.”

“This is a great example of the far-reaching benefits of true partnership. When we support the people and businesses that are in turn supporting our economy and community, that's a win for all of us,” said Fort Walton Beach Mayor Mike Anderson.

Kelly Windes, chairman of the Okaloosa County Commission, said the county is committed to economic development.

“By reducing the cost of doing business, as well as providing resources and jobs, we can have an impact on our local economy,” Windes said. “Props Brewery is a local success story, and we are proud to support their expansion.”

Nathan Sparks, executive director of the EDC of Okaloosa County, said any decision that results in new jobs in the county should be celebrated.

“Props Brewery is precisely the type of homegrown operation that the EDC is proud to assist, and the fact that the company was founded by entrepreneurs who first served our country as members of our military makes this one even more special,” Sparks said.

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